



## An Investigation of Western Influence in Visual Communications from Cambodian Non-Commercial Sources

● Phnom Penh

Willem Paling  
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## Certificate of Authorship/Originality

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Signature of Candidate

A handwritten signature in green ink, appearing to read 'Wille TS', is written over a faint, light blue grid background.

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## Abstract

This thesis is based on the analysis of 248 pieces of visual communications from Cambodian non-commercial sources along with interviews conducted with 10 non-commercial producers of visual communications in Cambodia.

Western influence was found to be widespread in numerous forms, ranging from such prosaic forms as their format and the technology used to produce them, to a tendency in some Christian material to depict the virtuous as European and the unvirtuous as more Asian.

At rural crossroads throughout Cambodia the corners present an array of billboards, with commercial billboards typically outnumbered by those from non-commercial sources such as NGOs and UN agencies. These bear messages such as the importance of vaccinations, the official voter registration procedure, the importance of registering the birth of children, advice on newly implemented laws, health advice and nutrition advice. Similar material exists in poster format in private homes, provincial hospitals, the houses of local leaders and other community spaces. Not publicly visible but existing in significant numbers are the books, leaflets, stickers, magazines and other forms of visual communications also produced by similar non-commercial organisations.

The prevalence of non-commercial organisations in Cambodia is such that the single biggest sector of the economy is the development sector. There are over 450 international and local non-government organisations, international organisations and donors operating in Cambodia. The majority of these organisations have some kind of western affiliation. This may be in the form of their funding sources, western staff, western religious affiliation or western educated Cambodian staff. Thus it can be expected that the presence of these western affiliations will be expressed to some degree in their visual communications.

It has been observed that economic development brings about somewhat predictable cultural changes. Khmer culture in particular is vulnerable as a result of the attempted abolition of religion and the closing of cultural institutions that was imposed by the

Democratic Kampuchea regime. While the effect that this material might have on the sustainability of Khmer culture cannot be gauged, an attempt has been made in this thesis to observe and identify the presence of these western influences in the context of cultural sustainability.



## Abbreviations

AIDS - Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome

AOG - Assemblies of God

AusAID - Australian Agency for International Development

BCC - Behaviour Change Communications

CCC - Cooperation Committee for Cambodia

CIC - Cambodian Information Center

CPP - Cambodian People's Party

CRDT - Cambodian Rural Development Team

DK - Democratic Kampuchea

E-E - Entertainment-Education

ESA - European Space Agency

FUNCINPEC - Front Uni National pour un Cambodge Indépendant, Neutre, Pacifique, et Coopératif (National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful, and Cooperative Cambodia).

HIV - Human Immunodeficiency Virus

JICA - Japan International Cooperation Agency

KID - Khmer Institute for Democracy

MoEYS - Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport of the Royal Government of Cambodia

MoH - Ministry of Health of the Royal Government of Cambodia

MVU - Maharishi Vedic University

NCHP - National Center for Health Promotion

NEC - National Election Committee

NGO - Non-Government Organisation

ORS - Oral Rehydration Salts

PSI - Population Services International

SIPAR - Soutien a l'Initiative Privee Pour l'Aide a la Reconstruction

SVA - Shanti Volunteer Association

TAP - (United Nations) Technical Assistance Program

TB - Tuberculosis

UNDP - United Nations Development Programme

UNESCO - United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

UNICEF - United Nations Children's Fund

UNTAC - United Nations Transitional Authority for Cambodia

USAID - United States Agency for International Development

UTS - University of Technology, Sydney

UXO - Unexploded Ordinance

WHO - World Health Organisation

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## Background

### Personal Motivation and Context

My motivation for this study comes from a personal interest in Cambodian development. During the period from 2002 to 2007 I spent a cumulative total of around 2 years working and living in Cambodia. Part of this time was spent working for the Australian Aid for Cambodia Fund, an Australian NGO that supports Maharishi Vedic University (MVU) in Kamchai Mear district, Prey Veng province. For the remainder of the time, I was resident in Phnom Penh conducting research for this thesis as well as undertaking various small projects with organisations such as the Buddhist Institute and the Cambodian Rural Development Team.

Before commencing this study, I found that the students at MVU held what I considered to be an inflated respect for western societies. Their dream for Cambodia, as I understood it, was for it to one day become a developed nation like Australia or the USA. I was confused by how highly these students and my Khmer colleagues valued owning a mobile phone, a car, a computer, and other modern items. I repeatedly saw friends and colleagues spend a month's wages on a mobile phone without hesitation. I personally received considerable respect; people who hardly knew me came to me for advice, because they valued my opinion as a foreigner. I could not understand this perceived awe of the west and all things modern.

As a visual communications designer, I wondered to what degree visual communications contributed to this awe, by intentionally, or unintentionally promoting western influences, particularly for NGOs, many of whom subscribe to a code of practice of which aims to "*respect the values, dignity, history, religion of the communities they serve*" (Cooperation Committee for Cambodia 2007b).

I have seen enough of Cambodia to witness first hand, young personal friends left fatherless by an inability to pay for proper medical treatment, losing their land in paying for the little medical help that they could afford. I have spent enough time in villages to know that village life is very difficult and that the abundance of smiles throughout rural Cambodia is not necessarily an accurate indication of the happiness of the proletariat.

This is worth mentioning because it is common for westerners, disgruntled with life in the west, to see the apparent happiness of Khmer people and wonder why anyone would seek to change their society.

During a six-week assignment in 2003, I was teaching Computing at the Kampong Cham branch campus of MVU, I used the Internet services of the Khmer Institute for Democracy's (KID) Community Information Centre (CIC). At the time, CIC was providing free Internet access, a small library, and classes focusing on democracy and human rights. At the time there were CICs in twenty-two provincial centres throughout Cambodia. I spent some time with the Kampong Cham branch manager, Mr Bun Rithy, as he taught me Khmer language and I helped with his English. As I spent more time at CIC and after speaking about the goals of CIC with Mr Bun Rithy, I formed the impression that this organisation exists primarily to serve US interests, and to promote views within Cambodian society that are in line with US policy. One of their current projects, the American Corner Program (Khmer Institute for Democracy 2003) involves setting up a library-like space, dedicated to information about the United States. Their primary source of funding is USAID via the Asian Foundation.

I became fascinated with the posters that they displayed in the building. Amongst other things, they dealt with drug abuse, weapons control, election issues and corruption all primarily through visual means. The bulk of non-commercial posters that I observed throughout Cambodia were composed of illustrations of Khmer people accompanied by a small amount of text. There were two things in particular that interested me. The first was the use of the visual message to communicate to the illiterate (approximately 30% of the population). The second was to do with the presence of western influences intentional and otherwise in these pieces of communications.

Given that westerners, or western organisations were involved at some level in the production of all these posters, I wondered about the degree to which western influences, present in visual campaigns such as these may have played some part in the development of the awe of the west that I perceived in many Cambodians. This masters research is being undertaken as an opportunity to explore, identify and clarify the ways in which western influence appears in non-commercial visual material.

I feel that it is worth noting, that as a westerner myself, I do not believe in the existence of universal values. I do not personally hold the conviction that those values identified as western in the literature review at Chapter 2, are universally appropriate for all nations in the world. Certainly, in Cambodia's brief period of stability following independence from France, Former Cambodian King, Norodom Sihanouk felt that the results of "Western-style democracy" were not sufficient to convince him that it ought to be "*introduced in Cambodia where there were no such traditions to support it*" (Sihanouk 1973, p. 46).

## **Cambodia's Recent History**

Although I have no strong political views, a study of Cambodia's recent history was useful background to gain an understanding of the context of my study. Whilst this thesis is not an analysis of political or historical contexts, the following outline is important in understanding the origin of the genre of non-commercial visual material analysed in this study.

Accounts of history in this period vary greatly and it is difficult to gain a non-partisan view. This is an account of my own understanding of this history, as it relates to this thesis. This understanding has been derived from reading books, newspapers and websites and from personal conversations with people who lived through these periods.

Cambodia's recent history has created the climate in which there is a significant amount of visual communications material being developed by internationally linked non-commercial organisations. The majority of these organisations were set up as part of the rebuilding process, after Cambodia suffered extensively during 25 years of war.

Since gaining independence from France in 1953, Cambodia enjoyed economic self-sufficiency and prosperity throughout the 1950s and early 1960s and significant infrastructure was put in place. The then Prince Norodom Sihanouk came under increasing pressure from the US to ease from his stance of neutrality with relation to the war in neighbouring Vietnam. Pressed by a journalist to choose between the "free world" or the "communist world", he stated: "I made my choice long ago. I choose Cambodia" (Khieu 2004). His neutrality earned him no favours from the US, and in

1970, a military coup installed General Lon Nol as president, whose government then received strong support from the US. Sihanouk fled, and formed a resistance movement, joining forces with the Communist Party of Kampuchea to form the National United Front of Kampuchea.

The National United Front of Kampuchea captured Phnom Penh in April 1975, and initially reinstated Prince Norodom Sihanouk as head of state. Control of power had been seized by Pol Pot, and he soon replaced King Sihanouk with President Khieu Samphan, but remained ultimately in control. Under Pol Pot's Maoist guidance, the state of Democratic Kampuchea (DK) was created. Urban areas were evacuated, and the people were forced into rural collectives. Estimates of the number of people who died from war, starvation or disease during the short-lived reign of Pol Pot's regime are in the range of one to two million.

A group of defectors from the regime regrouped in Vietnam, leading to the 1979 Vietnamese invasion, which resulted in the People's Republic of Kampuchea, based on a similar doctrine to Vietnam. Significant funding came from the Soviet Union. Pol Pot's forces withdrew to the west of the country and continued to mount low-level resistance attacks until 1998. The collapse of the Soviet Union, coupled with decreasing tensions between Sihanouk and Prime Minister Hun Sen, led to the 1991 Paris Peace Accords.

To sum up, in the last few decades, Cambodia has been emerging from a period of French colonialism, a brief occupation by the Japanese, a US bombing campaign associated with the war in Vietnam, the civil war that resulted in the reign of the Democratic Kampuchea regime and the Vietnamese invasion and that followed. The Vietnamese occupation was accompanied by ongoing civil war and 10 years of economic and political sanctions from the international community.

The fighting between the DK regime, royalist groups and the government, formally ended in 1991 when a truce was negotiated in Paris (the Paris Peace Accords). The United Nations Transitional Administration for Cambodia (UNTAC) was established, and it managed the country in the lead up to the 1993 national elections. The resulting constitution provides for a constitutional monarchy with a democratically elected senate and national assembly.

This turbulent period of history, culminating in the UN intervention and establishment of UNTAC, created the context for the rapid growth of Cambodia's development sector. In 2002, aid as a proportion of government revenue was the third highest of any country in the world (Hubbard). This growth of the development sector is what has brought about the rise of the types of visual material that are analysed in this study.